3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1960

John F. Kennedy vs Richard Nixon

A 35-minute lesson on the 1960 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA New Deal Coalition	ELECTORAL VOTES 537 total
WINNER John F. Kennedy (Democratic) · 303 EV	RUNNER-UP Richard Nixon (Republican) · 219 EV
KEY ISSUE Cold War; Cuba; civil rights; Kennedy's Catholicism; economic growth	TURNOUT 63.8%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1960: John F. Kennedy vs Richard Nixon

Timing

5 min	Warm-up	Imagine you have to convince a friend to vote for one candidate over another. Would you make your case with words or with pictures? Why?
15 min	Reading	The 1960 election was one of the closest in U.S. history. It was also the first election in which television played a major role - changing how American politics worked.

The Democratic candidate was John F. Kennedy, a senator from Massachusetts. He was 43 years old, Catholic, and the son of a wealthy Boston family. The Republican candidate was Richard Nixon, the vice president for the past eight years under Dwight Eisenhower. Nixon was 47 and a familiar national figure.

Kennedy faced two political problems. First, he was Catholic. No Catholic had ever been elected president. Many Protestant Americans worried that a Catholic president would take orders from the Pope. Kennedy addressed this head-on in a famous September 1960 speech in Houston, telling Protestant ministers that he believed in absolute separation of church and state.

Second, he was young and inexperienced. Nixon had been vice president for the whole Eisenhower presidency and had been the public face of American anti-communism during the Cold War. Kennedy had spent only eight years in the Senate.

Then came the debates. Four times that fall - on September 26, October 7, October 13, and October 21 - Kennedy and Nixon faced each other on national television. The first debate was the most consequential. About 70 million Americans watched. Kennedy looked young and confident. Nixon looked tired, ill, and sweaty. He had recently been hospitalized and had refused makeup for the television cameras. People who listened on the radio thought Nixon had won on substance. People who watched on television thought Kennedy had won decisively.

On election day Kennedy won 303 electoral votes to Nixon's 219. But the popular vote was extraordinarily close - Kennedy won by only about 113,000 votes out of more than 68 million cast, a margin of just 0.17 percent. Allegations of voter fraud in Illinois and Texas persisted for years; Nixon chose not to contest the result, saying the country could not afford a disputed transition.

Kennedy was inaugurated on January 20, 1961. His thousand days in office included the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba (a disaster), the Cuban Missile Crisis (a triumph), the launch of the Peace Corps, the start of the Apollo program to send a man to

		the Moon, and a slow turn toward supporting the civil rights movement. He was assassinated in Dallas on November 22, 1963, before he could run for re-election.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1960 Election

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Key words

Election	When adults vote to choose who will be the next president. The U.S. has a presidential election every four years.
Televised debate	When candidates argue on TV in front of a national audience. The 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debate was the first ever televised presidential debate.
Religious test	Judging a candidate by their religion rather than by their ideas or experience. Kennedy faced unofficial religious tests because he was Catholic.
Peace Corps	A program Kennedy started in 1961. Volunteers go to other countries to help with teaching, building, and farming. It still exists today.
Cold War	The decades-long competition between the United States and the Soviet Union (1947-1991). No direct shooting between the two countries, but it shaped almost every foreign policy decision in this period.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did John F. Kennedy receive in 1960?

( ) A. 219
( ) B. 303
( ) C. 395
( ) D. 447

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Kennedy's Catholicism a political problem in 1960?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did people who listened on the radio and people who watched on television have different opinions about who won the first 1960 debate?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Name two specific things Kennedy did as president before he was killed in 1963.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

303. Kennedy won 303 electoral votes; Nixon won 219; Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia got 15 from faithless electors.

The closeness was in the popular vote, not the electoral count. Kennedy carried key swing states like Illinois (with disputed Chicago returns) and Texas (LBJ's home state).

QUESTION 2

No Catholic had ever been elected president. Many Protestant Americans worried that a Catholic president would take orders from the Pope. Kennedy addressed this in a September 1960 speech to Protestant ministers in Houston, saying he believed in absolute separation of church and state.

The Houston speech is one of the famous moments in American religious-tolerance rhetoric. Kennedy's direct framing largely defused the issue.

QUESTION 3

On the radio, listeners judged the candidates only by their words. Nixon spoke clearly and made substantive arguments, so radio listeners thought he won. On television, viewers also saw the candidates. Kennedy looked young, healthy, and confident; Nixon looked tired, ill, and sweaty because he had refused makeup and was recovering from a hospital stay. Viewers thought Kennedy won.

The 1960 first debate is the standard textbook example of how television transformed political campaigning. The substance-vs-appearance split was unusually sharp.

QUESTION 4

Accept any two of: (1) Bay of Pigs invasion (April 1961, a failure). (2) Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962, resolved without nuclear war). (3) Started the Peace Corps (March 1961). (4) Announced the Apollo program to send a man to the Moon (May 1961). (5) Sent federal troops to enforce desegregation at the University of Mississippi (1962). (6) Proposed civil rights legislation that LBJ later passed in 1964.

Kennedy's thousand days were eventful. Naming two specific items shows the student understood his presidency wasn't just about his style.